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ABSTRACT

An antecedent-consequent model of toddlers' socially directed messages to peers was developed to investigate the differential success of themes in eliciting interaction. Videotaped observational data collected under a short-term longitudinal design were obtained from two playgroups, each consisting of six toddler-age boys. Toddlers' social attempts were characterized thematically to specify the underlying intent in each act. A total of 25 themes were selected as describing most of those used by toddlers in their approaches to each other. (Examples of themes included "check reaction," "attract attention," and "object possession.") Themes served as the focal point of the antecedent-consequent coding model. Results indicated that the success of the toddlers' social messages in initiating and/or sustaining social interaction depended upon their themes; those largely unsuccessful in eliciting interaction were vague in meaning. By contrast, themes that consistently emerged as successful in eliciting interaction seemed to have inherent "control" characteristics in gaining a response. The finding that much of toddler interaction occurs without shared meaning was supported by the results. Finally, findings affirmed the salience of objects in the toddler's social world for the development of the child's social themes and initiations. (RH)

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BEFORE "SHARED MEANING": THE ELICITATION AND MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL THEMES AMONG TODDLERS

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As presented at the 50th Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Detroit, Michigan, April, 1983.

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BEFORE "SHARED MEANING": THE ELICITATION AND MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL THEMES AMONG TODDLERS

Cheryl F. Bragg

When those nonverbal infants and toddlers make communicative attempts to their peers, what might be going through their heads? What meaning or intention might they have? Are some meanings more successful than others in eliciting their peers' attention? Moreover, should they succeed in eliciting their peers' attention, do they also successfully share their meanings or intention with them?

To investigate these questions, the present study developed an antecedent-consequent model around toddlers' socially-directed messages to peers. Video observational data was collected on dyads from 2 playgroups, of 6 toddler boys each, under a short-term longitudinal design (the same playgroups from which Edward Mueller and colleagues have conducted their prior toddler research, e.g. Brenner and Mueller, 1981).

The toddlers' social attempts were characterized thematically, in an effort to capture the child's underlying intent or meaning in each act. This classification originates from prior conception and investigation of toddlers' sharing social themes in their interaction (Brenner and Mueller, 1981). That research stressed the content of toddlers' peer interactions. Two children play together as if they each understand a single overriding theme that guides and constrains the interaction, such as peek-a-boo, or object possession struggle. Twelve such sharable themes were found. In an effort to understand more about the process of how toddlers come to agree about a theme of an interaction, this study sought to describe the themes that the toddlers

approached each other with, prior to any meaning being shared.

Themes were judged by the child's behavior, but were described as if they were cognitive constructs, that is, as if the child was thinking "I want to . . .", such as "I want to give this object to you." This theme might be judged by the act of giving or receiving, or offering. Themes are inferential constructs which may go beyond the meaning of a single behavioral act to an entire pattern or series of child behaviors.

Through pilot observation, 25 themes were selected as describing most of the toddlers' meaning. These are provided in Table 1. These range from fairly vague meanings as might be seen in a parallel play situation, for example (particularly themes #1 and #2), to themes frequently evoking shared meaning interaction (as denoted in the table).

Insert Table 1 here

These themes served as the focal point of the antecedent-consequent coding model developed. A coding manual was constructed to capture the sequential activities of both the focal child and his peer around the focal theme performance (intercoder reliability was .85). This involved long-term and immediate antecedents, as well as consequences (which won't be described in detail for the present paper). Why some themes were successful and others not successful in eliciting interaction, was the major underlying question of the present study. To answer this, the differential success of toddler themes - to elicit and maintain peer interaction - was examined.

For this analysis, theme performances provided the basis for sampling in the study, generating a total sample of 1080 theme performances among the 12 children. However, I did not sample for content, but for position in interaction. Three types of themes were sampled:

1) initiating themes that did not elicit a response (isolateds),

2) initiating themes that were successful in obtaining a response (initials), and

3) themes given in response to successful initiating themes (internals); those in the second position of an interaction.

So, for each designated 15-minute tape segment, a search for socially-directed attempts would be made; each attempt found would be classified as one of the three types. Sampling was balanced across the theme types, for each playgroup, dyad, and child. Data were collected at three points in time across the six-month duration of each playgroup: 12, 15, and 18 months from the 1st-playgroup, and 18, 21, and 24 months from the 2nd playgroup.

Results overwhelmingly indicate that the success of the toddlers' social messages in initiating and/or sustaining social interaction, depended upon their particular theme (chi-square = 176.64; df 26; p .0001). This is demonstrated in Table 2 for 16 of the most significant theme performances. Notice how most

Insert Table 2 here

of the themes presented, significantly distinguish themselves as a certain theme-type. For example, note the contrast between the themes of "check reaction" (#7), "positive affect" (#17), and "object possession" (#20). The "check reaction" theme distinguished itself as an isolated, the "positive affect" theme as an isolated and an initial, and the "object possession" theme as an initial and an internal. I'll now explain these findings in more detail.

Themes that were largely unsuccessful in eliciting interaction were also ones considered to have vague meaning, by definition. These themes included "I want to check your reaction to my action," and "I want to attract your attention to me" (numbers 7 and 8). The "check reaction" theme was defined as

follows:

> Generally child looks to peer contiguously following action or manipulation of an object. Theme of child not clear; possibilities include: wanting to draw attention to himself or object, wanting to see what other child is doing, wanting to initiate motorcopy, or actually gauging other child's interest in his action.

This theme, as well as the "attract attention" theme seemed to serve the purpose of expressing an interest in the peer, but the content of the social message just wasn't clear, and hence did not often elicit interaction.

In contrast, themes that consistently emerged as successful in eliciting interaction seemed to have inherent control characteristics in gaining a response. These themes included: "I want to be in that space . . ." (#9), "I want to give this object to you . . ." (#22), and "I want that object that you have . . ." (#23). The latter two themes were also prominent as internals. Let's examine the definitions of these themes:

With the space possession theme, the child's choice of territory seems to be his primary focus.

The theme of object exchange is to transfer possession of object. Includes offers, gives, as well as receives. When the children agree to the exchange of the object, the meaning becomes shared.

The theme of object possession includes such behaviors as take, pull away, reach for, protest vocal, keep, and grab. When the children agree to struggle over the possession of the object, as shown by their attempts to get it or keep it, and by their acknowledgement that the other child wants it, the meaning becomes shared.

The findings suggest that offering a toy or taking a toy are powerful themes in which toddlers elicit a response from a peer and sustain social contact.

But what else? Both the space possession theme and the object possession theme are intrusive. It is certainly hard to ignore another who comes up to you

and wants to be in the very spot you happen to be in, or who wants that toy you've been so dutifully engaged with. (More than likely you are the one that has made that space or toy interesting in the first place!) Not only are you likely to respond, but the results indicate that you are also likely to maintain the same theme as the initiating child - hence shared meaning.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that the space possession theme was not among one of Brenner and Mueller's (1981) twelve dictionary shared meanings, nor was it considered a potential shared meaning in this study. Yet, the present findings indicate that the most frequent response to this theme was the "Leave me alone" theme (#10), where often a child makes active efforts to show the other child that he wants to be left alone, through ward-off gestures, negative vocalizations, and/or seemingly aggressive acts. Interestingly enough, the "Leave me alone" theme significantly stood out as an internal theme-type. So, like the object possession struggle, we seem to have an understood space possession struggle.

The object exchange theme is likewise, one hard to ignore: when another child comes up to you offering an attractive toy, it's pretty hard to refuse. Again, the findings show that you'd be most likely to respond by maintaining the initiated theme.

In fact, the object possession theme and object exchange themes were the two most likely themes to elicit shared meaning interaction out of all the 25 themes. Moreover, a shared meaning response was more likely for these themes than any other potential response. These findings confirm most all earlier toddler research of the significance of objects in the child's world, and I quote from Mueller and Vandell's chapter on infant interaction (1979; 598):

> "With the potential importance of objects in terms of their demand and invitation characteristics, it is noteworthy that an abundance of early social contacts do, in fact, include objects - objects act as vehicles for various forms of interaction."

It is not surprising then, that this study found object-centered activity to be the most significant long-term antecedent activity (which was defined as a period of 30 seconds before the socially-directed theme), and immediate antecedent activity of the respondent (a period of 5 seconds).

An interesting result emerged, however, when looking at the significant antecedent activity for the two object themes just discussed. While object-centered activity was the predominant antecedent (both long-term and immediate) for the object possession theme, teacher involvement (one of our antecedent codes) was the predominant antecedent (both long-term and immediate) for the object exchange theme. Given that this theme most often occurred after involvement with an adult in the playroom, this finding suggests that object exchange may well be a meaning that the child does not initially take from the peer-peer system. While object possession would seem to derive from the toddler world itself - of being intensely involved with objects.

What about the findings of any other themes demonstrated in the table? Two themes shown to be used frequently by the toddlers to initiate interaction were: "I want to show positive affect towards you" (#17), and "I want to vocalize to you" (#12). However, as indicated in Table 2, these themes were successful in eliciting interaction only half the time. That is, given that you approach a toddler with a positive affect theme, you seem to have a 50-50 chance of gaining a response to your initiation.

Why would that be? While these themes clearly express a prosocial interest in the other child, -- it would seem that they do not evoke the control dynamics of the object-related themes, or of the space possession theme.

Let's examine the definition of these themes:

positive affect : Child expresses or encourages pleasure or amusement (e.g., smile, positive touch, laugh, vocal sounds). Actions can also imply attempts to be congenial, affinitive, or

agreeable. When both children exchange or repeat these actions together, and acknowledge that each other's actions are understood, then their meaning is s' .ed.

vocal prosocial : When child utters a vocalization to his peer which connotes an effort at communication (either neutral or positive in affect). If the two children agree to "talk" with each other (messages are usually not composed of words), their meaning becomes shared.

In part, it would seem that the signal qualities of initiating these themes would play a role in whether a response is achieved. That is, is the message clear? Does the toddler already have the attention of his peer? etc. Neither theme is mediated by objects and neither is intrusive. This study's findings also show that even when both themes were successful in eliciting interaction, their likelihood of sharing their theme was not as significant as their obtaining one of the other theme responses.

Overall, these findings indicate that a toddler's success in achieving peer interaction, significantly depends upon what particular theme the child approaches the other with. The present research suggests that the content of social messages plays an essential role in the development of early peer communication, as children learn how their different themes impact on others. The present paper demonstrates the process by which a child might come to share a meaning with another and sustain interaction. It appears that the early phases of this process are determined by the child's ability to produce themes with high control value. Moreover, this study confirms Brenner and Mueller's (1981) findings that much toddler interaction occurs without shared meaning. Finally, findings from antecedent activity affirm the salience of objects in the toddler's social world, for the development of the child's social themes and social initiations.

References

Brenner, J. and Mueller, E. "Shared meaning in boy toddlers' peer relations", Child Development, 1982, 53, 380-391.

Mueller, E. and Vandell, D. "Infant-infant interaction." In J. Osofsky (Ed.) Handbook of Infant Development. New York: Wiley, 1979.

Table 1

THEMES	SHARED MEANINGS[1]
1. I want to play with you and/or this object.	
2. I want to be beside you / or with my object beside you.	
3. I want to attend to you.	
4. I want to be with the teacher.	
5. I want to physically explore you.	
6. I want to show this object to you.	
7. I want to check your reaction (or awareness), to my action.	
8. I want to attract your attention to me.	
9. I want to be in that space / or on that object.	*
10. I want to be alone / or I respect your wanting to be left alone.	*
11. I want to cooperatively play with you.	*
12. I want to vocalize to you.	VOCAL PROSOCIAL
13. I want to name/label objects.	SHARED REFERENCE
14. I want to be vocally negative to you.	*
15. I want to copy what you say.	VOCAL COPY
16. I want to copy what you do / or I want you to copy me.	MOTOR COPY
17. I want to show positive affect towards you.	POSITIVE AFFECT
18. I want you to chase me / or I want to chase you.	RUN-CHASE
19. I want to be chased through the curtain / or I want to chase you through the curtain.	CURTAIN RUNNING
20. I want to taunt/tease you.	*
21. I want to play peek-a-boo.	PEEK-A-BOO
22. I want to give this object to you / I will receive this object.	OBJECT EXCHANGE
23. I want the object that you have / I want to keep my object.	OBJECT POSSESSION
24. I want to aggress towards you.	AGGRESSION
25. I want to rough and tumble play with you.	ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE

* also found to be potentially sharable meanings.

[1] Taken from Brenner and Mueller (1981).

Table 2

Number of Occurrences of Each Theme by Theme-Types

THEME*	Theme Types: ISOLATED	INITIALS	INTERNALS	TOTAL
CHECK REACTION (7)	56	17	2	75
ATTRACT ATTENTION (8)	35	15	1	51
SPACE POSSESSION (9)	4	17	7	28
OBJECT EXCHANGE (22)	10	35	32	77
OBJECT POSSESSION (23)	32	64	54	150
POSITIVE AFFECT (17)	46	37	19	102
VOCAL PROSOCIAL (12)	57	54	16	127
PHYSICALLY EXPLORE (5)	10	3	1	14
LEAVE ME ALONE (10)	11	7	27	45
VOCAL NEGATIVE (14)	6	6	9	21
VOCAL COPY (15)	3	7	8	18
MOTOR COPY (16)	19	19	18	56
CURTAIN RUNNING + RUN-CHASE (18 + 19)	6	10	7	23
PEEK-A-BOO (21)	15	17	15	47
AGGRESSION (24)	19	10	10	39
TOTAL	329	318	226	873

* corresponding theme # from Table 1 in parentheses